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From Santiago to Bangkok: Exploring K-Pop Fandom Activism in Chile and Thailand

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From Santiago to Bangkok: Exploring K-Pop Fandom Activism in Chile and Thailand

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ABSTRACT

In 2019, Chilean K-pop fans mobilised in a collective effort through online activism to support the anti-government protests raising awareness and voicing their political opinion by utilising K-pop mechanics. In 2021 Chilean K-pop fans organised a presidential campaign endorsing candidate Gabriel Boric. Similarly, Thai K-pop fans played a significant role in the 2020 pro-democracy movement by raising awareness of the movement and organising fundraisers to support protesters with equipment and providing legal advice. In both instances, fans used K-pop tactics to effectively and meaningfully contribute to the political causes they deemed important.

Thus, through the analysis of fans' activities and content shared online, aided by news articles reporting on fans' actions, this thesis aims to research the following questions: How did Chilean and Thai K-pop fans engage in political activism? What factors contribute to the politicisation of these K-pop fan communities? How did their actions influence public discourse and social change? This thesis concludes that both Chilean and Thai K-pop fans have effectively leveraged fandom tactics for political activism. Their actions underscore the intersections of cultural and political participation, highlighting how these K-pop fandoms can evolve into relevant and meaningful political forces.

Keywords:

- **K-pop**
- **Fandom**
- **Fan Activism**
- **K-pop activism**
- **Glocalisation**

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Note on Conventions

When addressing terms originating from Korean, they are written according to the McCune-Reischauer Romanisation system. This is limited to terms with an established romanised version used or known in South Korea. In addition, Korean, Spanish, and Thai terms will be explained and translated. Furthermore, unless stated otherwise, K-pop is an umbrella term for all aspects of K-pop. This is for clarity reasons and to avoid wordy constructions. Next, Korea always indicates South Korea unless stated otherwise. Lastly, the Korean wave and Hallyu are used interchangeably.

Introduction

Within recent years, K-pop fans have achieved a new form of power and are not afraid to use it. K-pop fans have accomplished political goals that have astounded both outsiders and politicians. They do more than just advocate for their idols or pursue interests that are simply fan-centric, their collective efforts extend far beyond that. Fans in the United States (US) made headlines for their efforts in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, however, similar phenomena have occurred in Chile and Thailand. In 2019, Chile experienced many protests against the government. In a collective effort, Chilean K-pop fans mobilised and attempted to aid these protests against the government through online activism and were harshly condemned for doing so, by both outsiders as well as the government.¹ Nonetheless, these fans mobilised their fan communities and used K-pop as a tool to stand up for what they believe in and spread awareness. After these protests, Chilean K-pop fans also campaigned for Gabriel Boric during the 2021 presidential election, which he won. In an organised effort stemming from six K-pop fans, they were able to mobilise fans online and campaign for the presidential candidate. Second,

¹ Gustavo A. Rivero, “K-pop: From Musical Fanaticism to Political Activism,” *Latinoamérica 21*, January 21, 2022. <https://latinoamerica21.com/en/k-pop-from-musical-fanaticism-topolitical-activism/>.

Thai K-pop fans actively supported and donated during the 2020 anti-government protests. In Thailand, K-pop fans have often used their communities to stand up for political causes and often urged Thai K-pop idols to support them. In the 2020 anti-government protests, K-pop fans used social media to garner attention from fellow international K-pop fans and helped raise money for protesting gear and pro-bono legal advice for arrested protesters.² The fans consciously identified themselves as K-pop fans and actively used K-pop in their favour to support the causes they deemed important. In recent years, especially with the rise and ease of access to social media, fans of all kinds have made their presence known outside their communities and advocate for social and political issues. While fans, particularly K-pop fans, are stereotyped as obsessive teenagers, the (political) force these fans and fandoms hold is significant within the political climate. Fan activism is also not new, however, it seems that with the help of social media, fandoms have adopted fandom tactics to initiate and promote political activism.

Through case studies of K-pop fans in Chile and Thailand, this research aims to answer the following questions: How did Chilean and Thai K-pop fans engage in political activism? What factors contribute to the politicisation of these K-pop fan communities? How did their actions influence public discourse and social change? This will be done by analysing fans' activities and their content shared on social media, and through an analysis of newspaper articles covering K-pop fans in Chile and Thailand regarding their activism concerning the specific instances mentioned previously. The analysis is aided by analytical frameworks and conducted through the conceptual lens of glocalisation. The case studies were chosen as they had made international headlines and went viral on social media.

² Elin Bergner, "Why China Fears K-pop Fandoms," *Institute for Security and Development Policy*, January 1, 2022. <https://isdpl.eu/china-korea-k-pop-crackdowns-hong-kong/>.

One crucial matter to discuss is how this research defines K-pop and how this will be used throughout this study. K-pop entails not only the music, idols, and genres, but also its fans and fan culture. This thesis focuses primarily on the latter, however, will use K-pop as an umbrella term to avoid wordy constructions. Furthermore, it also allows this thesis to freely explore what makes K-pop fans inclined to partake in political activism.

The first chapter explores the conceptual themes that are fundamental to this research: the Korean wave and glocalisation. Chapter two examines K-pop fandom, its mechanics and culture, and activism demonstrating how the subject has been treated previously. Furthermore, this chapter provides the analytical framework through which this research will be conducted. The third chapter provides an extensive analysis of Chilean and Thai K-pop fans and their actions towards political activism. It furthermore investigates fandom politicisation and the impacts these fans had.

Currently, there is a lack of research examining K-pop fandoms and their engagement in political activism. In addition, the majority of the research on this subject is superficial as it often simply explores what actions fans have undertaken in support of research regarding the Korean wave. Previously mentioned studies have revealed how K-pop fans engage in political activism predominantly within the U.S. or focussed solely on fans of the Korean boy band Bangtan Sonyeondan (방탄소년단, hereafter BTS). Therefore, this research aims to build on that knowledge and apply it to fandoms outside the U.S. with different political climates. The case studies were chosen as they made (international) headlines and were trending topics on social media, therefore, this research allows to understand how K-pop fans in different countries localise K-pop for their benefit.

By building on earlier research, this study seeks to provide fresh perspectives on K-pop fans' political activism as well as to further the understanding of K-pop fan culture and the inclination towards political activism. Hence, this research also aims to present new insights

into political activism by K-pop fans, the politicisation of K-pop, and their impacts by exploring fans in Chile and Thailand. Lastly, this research does not aim to conclude anything about K-pop altogether as this might be superficial and, therefore, focuses on the aforementioned case studies.

Chapter 1: The Korean Wave and Glocalisation

This chapter serves as an introduction to the concepts of the Korean wave and glocalisation. These concepts are crucial for understanding the global reach of K-pop and how international fans interact with and localise K-pop for their benefit.

The Korean wave -or Hallyu- and its impacts are unprecedented in today's cultural climate. After Psy's viral hit, "Gangnam Style" in 2012 and with the emergence of social media, Korean pop culture has taken the world by storm. The Korean wave has a multifaceted influence on a global level and K-pop, K-beauty, K-drama, and K-food have entered mainstream culture globally. The political intervention regarding the spread of K-culture and the nation-branding conception of the Korean wave is a contributing factor to its success. Therefore, much of the current literature on the Korean Wave pays particular attention to the wave's soft power potential and its cultural diplomacy strategies.

In an analysis of Nye, soft power, or co-optive power, can shape the preferences of others to achieve and align them with the desired outcomes of the benefactor. In opposition to hard power, which relies on coercion and force, soft power enlists support through resources such as culture, political values, and foreign policies.³ While Nye's framework enables investigation of the differences in hard and soft power, scholars argue that his argument excessively relies on America's position in world politics and, therefore, this framework primarily aids in strengthening said position. Lee argues that Nye's framework lacks

³ Joseph S. Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political & Social Science*, Vol. 616 (2008): 94, 95, 97.

universality and cannot be applied to countries whose political power and cultural dominance is not comparable to that of the U.S. Instead he proposes a framework that suggests hard and soft power originate from hard and soft resources. Accordingly, hard and soft power relies on the resources or symbolic resources used to secrete power, whereas hard and soft resources can be used interchangeably for hard and soft power purposes.⁴ These resources include national slogans, public diplomacies, the spread of theories and discourses, museums, language, and national heroes.⁵

Furthermore, Lee argues that people can also exert soft power through charitable actions for specific universal values for example, or by being role models.⁶ K-pop and K-pop idols have been in the foreground of the spread of the Korean wave and K-pop idols are often promoted as ambassadors for South Korea. The Korean boyband BTS serves as an influential example of the arguments mentioned earlier. For example, BTS was appointed as the “special presidential envoy for future generations and culture” by former President Moon Jae-In in 2021.⁷ BTS accompanied Moon and visited the 76th session of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly session in New York for the Sustainable Development Goals (SGD) meeting. The Korean government stated that BTS’ attendance serves as a “meaningful opportunity to expand communication with future generations around the world and draw their sympathy on major international issues.”⁸ Here it is clear that the Korean government deploys BTS in an attempt to cater to a broad and young audience that enjoys BTS’ music and aims to use BTS’ influence to cast attention to the meeting. This gesture is also highly relevant to South Korea’s position and soft power influence. By deploying BTS as a soft power resource, they can display their

⁴ Geun Lee, “A Theory of Soft Power,” *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 21, no. 2 (2009): 206, 207, 209.

⁵ Lee, “A Theory,” 208-209.

⁶ Lee, “A Theory,” 213.

⁷ Chae Young Oh and Shihoo Lee, “South Korean President appoints BTS as special envoys before their visit to the UN,” *ABC News*, September 14, 2021. <https://abcnews.go.com/International/south-korean-president-appoints-bts-special-envoys-visit/story?id=80006773>

⁸ Oh and Lee, “South Korean.”

cultural influence globally and attempt to shed light on the issues discussed in the meeting to fans and non-fans alike. Furthermore, it positions BTS as role models, who care about global issues which in turn can inspire young people to also care and take actions towards social issues.

In addition, Keith takes on a broader perspective and argues that BTS serve as cultural ambassadors which allows them to serve as a soft power mechanism, however, not be perceived as state-driven. Regardless of whether the government uses idols as a means of soft power, the idols and their companies remain autonomous, allowing them to serve as informal emblematic representatives of South Korea, while maintaining autonomy over their work.⁹ Additionally, Kang addresses how BTS's lyrics use a storytelling strategy that forms an emotional sense of unity and allows listeners to share empathy or sympathy. The theme of BTS's music is to empathise with and attempt to heal younger people about the realities that they are experiencing in these modern times. Therefore, he argues, that their lyrics can represent Korea's cultural values and can be naturally conveyed abroad.¹⁰ This is relevant as it might suggest that K-celebrities exert soft power even when unintended.

Circling back to soft power, Cicchelli and Octobre argue that the Korean wave represents "sweet power." They establish that the Korean Wave emerged from the intersection of regional and global influences, aimed at cultural reciprocity instead of hegemonic dominance. South Korea portrays itself as a "sweet" nation, with a past free from imperialistic ambitions aiming to exchange culture through understanding and acceptance instead of imposing its culture.

The studies presented thus far provide evidence that South Korea has effectively used its cultural products as a means for nation branding and this thesis argues that Korea's position as

⁹ Sarah Keith, "BTS as cultural ambassadors: K-pop and Korea in Western media," in *The Soft Power of Korean Wave: Parasite, BTS and Drama*, ed. Youna Kim (New York: Routledge, 2022), 160-161.

¹⁰ Jun-Soo Kang, "so-p'ũ-t'ũ-p'a-wō-lo pon han-lyu-lo-sō-ũi pang-t'an-so-nyōn-tan ko-ch'al" [프트파워로 본 한류로서의 방탄소년단 고찰], *이벤트컨벤션연구* [Event and Convention Research], Vol.15, no. 3 (2019): 101-102.

a non-threatening nation may certainly have aided in the positive reception of its cultural products. Regardless, the relatability of K-pop and K-drama and its incredible high-value productions were able to spread mostly organically through the rise of social media which allowed a broad (international) audience to interact with K-products. This thesis also argues that through the positive reception of K-pop, the intended soft power goals may have caused unintended outcomes such as fans utilising K-pop as a resource for political activism. As will be explored later in this thesis, the messaging of K-pop songs, the demographic of international fans, and Korea's political background that is portrayed within K-pop may have aided fans to utilise K-pop as an instrument for political activism.

Next, the global influence of K-pop brings us to the concept of glocalisation. K-pop in and of itself is a reaction to the hegemonic Western-dominated music culture. K-pop has localised Western culture to create a culturally hybrid musical genre that embraces both Korean and Western-style music. Furthermore, K-pop is localised internationally in two ways; first, K-pop includes different cultures and cultural aspects to create a universally appreciated product that celebrates different cultures and does not impose a singular Korean culture upon its recipients. Its use of cultural hybridisation allows it to adapt to foreign markets and has the ability to blend Western and Asian values into one.¹¹ Second, international K-pop fans use, mould, and appropriate as a way to localise K-pop and enjoy it in their particular manner without having to adhere to Korean standards. Therefore, K-pop caters to the lived experiences of fans in their country, but also to the lived experience of a global citizen. As this thesis concerns (international) K-pop fans primarily, this thesis focuses on the latter realised way of glocalisation.

Roudemetof describes glocalisation as naturally following globalisation and refers to instances where a 'locally instigated wave' spreads throughout the globe. The concept differs

¹¹ Vincenzo Cicchelli, Sylvie Octobre, and Sarah-Louise Raillard, "An Alternative Globalization of Pop," in *The Sociology of Hallyu Pop Culture*. (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2021), 99.

from transnationalism as that would imply small cross-border connections only.¹² Hallyu, therefore, can be considered a global wave, since in recent years the Korean wave has surpassed its close border connections and reached all parts of the world. Furthermore, glocalisation is globalisation refracted through the local and is globally experienced via a local lens.¹³ Hallyu is experienced locally through local fan communities and local participation in K-pop. Hallyu is then adapted to reflect local values, beliefs and identities through fan communities (and fans in general). Therefore, political activism utilising K-pop would stem from the local experience of K-pop fans, who can use K-pop within their local context as a tool for their desired goals.

Chapter 2: K-pop as a Political Space

This chapter explores literature concerning K-pop fan culture, examining the mechanics through which they operate and mobilise. Additionally, this chapter will explore previous scholarship regarding K-pop fandom activism, and provide a comprehensive account of how K-pop fans engage in social and political activism. Lastly, this chapter aims to provide the theoretical backdrop and approach for the analysis in chapter three which allows to analyse K-pop fans' impact on social and political activism. Furthermore, as the aim of this thesis is not to generalise all K-pop fans and K-pop (related) activity as inherently political, this chapter aims to theorise how fan activities can be analysed specifically in the context of political activism. Overgeneralising these activities could cause a depoliticised effect and delegitimise their actions.

First, this research establishes a definition of fandom. Jenkins describes fandoms as consisting of passionate fans who display strong cohesion and share a culture of their own.¹⁴

¹² Victor Roudometof, "Theorizing Glocalization: Three Interpretations (1)," *the European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 19, no. 3 (2016): 398.

¹³ Roudometof, "Theorizing Glocalization," 399, 401.

¹⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Textual poachers* (2nd edition, Taylor and Francis, 2012).

Brough and Shresthova define fandom as individuals who deeply engage with or assert their identity through popular content. Fandom, thus, consists of individuals who form a collective or subcultural identity through interest-driven connections.¹⁵ Therefore, this thesis establishes the following definition; a fandom consists of fans who actively engage with certain popular content and portray a deeply interconnected culture through which these individuals assert their identity and community. Within K-pop fandoms, the aforementioned aspects are made abundantly clear. Fans establish a community based on their favourite artist, group, or even personal characteristics and establish a specific culture within that fandom that individuals align with. Second, this research defines fan activism. Earl et al. establish that fan activism exists in two forms; activism concerning specific cultural products or practices, and second explicitly political activism driven by fan communities.¹⁶ This thesis is primarily concerned with the latter, as K-pop fandoms in Chile and Thailand have contributed to specific civic and political activism.

2.1 K-pop Fandom Culture

K-pop fans mobilise together and they mobilise quickly. The ability to mobilise in large numbers and within a small timeframe has become a crucial driver for K-pop fandoms. First and foremost, K-pop is increasingly fast-paced; groups release new music and albums several times a year and are meticulously planned. Furthermore, idols and groups produce a high volume of content to keep fans engaged, thus, time is of the essence when new information or music is released. K-pop bands hugely depend on fans and their interactions online to survive as artists, as such it is vital that fans can spread support online fast and in great numbers. Accordingly, fans tend to make collective efforts or engage in “fan labour work” as Kang et al.

¹⁵ Melissa M. Brough and Sangita Shresthova, “Fandom Meets Activism: Rethinking Civic and Political Participation,” In “Transformative Works and Fan Activism,” ed. Henry Jenkins and Sangita Shresthova, *Transformative Works and Culture*, no. 10 (2012): 2.

¹⁶ Jennifer Earl, Thomas V. Maher, and Thomas Elliott, “Youth, Activism, and Social Movements,” *Sociology Compass* 11, no. 4 (April 1, 2017), 7.

point out.¹⁷ This “fan labour” consists of massive streaming and downloading of songs to increase their ranks in online charts, collectively spam tweeting with relevant hashtags to create notice on the trending tab, and massively voting for their favourite artist for music awards.¹⁸ When a song or video clip is released, fans assemble and prepare to skyrocket views and streams. They do so in an orderly fashion and ‘veteran’ fans often prepare before releases. To achieve their goals, descriptions, rules, and guides are frequently published and shared online.¹⁹ Working together and showing massive support stands at the forefront for K-pop fans. For fans generating mass support is vital as it is common for K-pop bands to disband quickly when they seem irrelevant or not popular enough.²⁰

Subsequently, collaboration and collective action is an essential part of K-pop fandoms. Oftentimes, fandoms of particular artists also combine their efforts with other fandom to increase their reach and power. This is done strategically and establishes an allyship between groups.²¹ Generally, all of the efforts that fans put into supporting their favourite artist are done in a collaborative effort. Fans massively supporting their idols as a collective is not new or exclusively practised by K-pop fans, nonetheless, this fan behaviour is extremely prevalent for K-pop fans. Notably with the interexchange between social media platforms and K-pop content, it is a reliable and accessible way to spread support and increase popularity. For this reason, K-pop fans are often faced with negative sentiments, from both non-K-pop fans to media outlets, caused by the passionate and organised manner through which they operate.²² Nonetheless, most of the work K-pop fans provide stems from wanting to spread their favourite artist's

¹⁷ Jiwon Kang et al., “Behind the scenes of K-pop fandom: unveiling K-pop fandom collaboration network,” *Quality and Quantity*, Vol. 56 (2022): 1483.

¹⁸ Kang et al., “Behind,” 1483.

¹⁹ Kang et al., “Behind,” 1489.

²⁰ Emily Blake, “The Strength Of K-Pop Fandom, By The Numbers,” *Forbes*, April 4, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emilyblake1/2018/04/04/k-pop-numbers/##79bd4ce948ab>.

²¹ Kang et al., “Behind,” 1498.

²² Amanda Lopez, “K-Pop fandoms: the complex community built from a love of music,” *Medium*, August 26, 2021. <https://medium.com/outro-words/k-pop-fandoms-the-complex-community-built-from-a-love-of-music-febcb288d39e>.

popularity. Hence, an overarching and significant aspect of K-pop fandoms involves participatory cultural practices. All of the above would not work without fans actively participating. K-pop fandoms are a collaborative network that consists of tight-knit communities that hold dynamic relations with one another. Fans also encourage active participation and experienced fans often help new or less experienced fans to acquire the knowledge needed to successfully participate; members build up associations within the communities and come up with norms, rules, and ethics that work within the fandom community.²³ Fans become part of a community that shares a collective identity, allowing them to find like-minded individuals who share the same interests and topics.

In his book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Jenkins offers an elaborate framework for fandom analysis highlighting five key concepts. First, Jenkins argues that fans in fandoms actively engage with media texts rather than passively consuming them. This is called participatory culture. Fans thus become ‘textual poachers’ and appropriate and reimagine media which in turn suits their interests and desires.²⁴ Jenkins characterises participatory culture as having relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, portraying strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and offering some type of informal mentorship, whereby information known by more experienced people is passed down to less experienced people. Additionally, it allows members to feel that their contributions matter and that there is some degree of social connection.²⁵ These aspects have been earlier defined as an integral part of K-pop fandoms and thus K-pop fandoms show a high degree of participatory culture.

²³ Listya Ayu Saraswati and Nurbaity, “BTS ARMY’s #BTSLOVEYOURSELF: A Worldwide K-Pop Fandom Participatory Culture on Twitter,” *KnE Social Sciences*, Vol. 4, No. 14 (2020): 424.

²⁴ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*.

²⁵ Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito, and Danah Boyd, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce, and Politics* (Polity, 2015), 4.

Furthermore, he describes the concepts of interpretative communities and fan practices. Fandoms are groups of fans who share common practices and form specifically around particular media or genres. Fans engage in collective interpretation and discussions all the while these communities provide a supportive environment for fans to explore and discuss their shared interests.²⁶ Especially with the power of social media nowadays, fans can communicate, share, and interact with others in their communities from anywhere. Lastly, he argues that for many fans, participation in fandoms allows fans to feel a sense of community with like-minded individuals who share passions. Fandom thus becomes a central aspect of their identity and self-expression.²⁷ Consequently, participatory fan culture plays a large role in the spread of K-pop-related information as well as social causes that resonate with these like-minded fans as will be explored in the following sections. The aforementioned concepts can also be indicative of why K-pop fans might be more predisposed to political activism. K-pop fans establish a strong sense of community and collective identity, driven by shared interests and values. This solidarity can make fans more predisposed to come together for collective action, whether this relates to K-pop content or not. Nonetheless, the following sections will explore other factors that may contribute to the predisposition of fans and activism.

2.2 K-pop Activism

The aforementioned mechanics also play a crucial part in K-pop fans' activism and enables fans to act promptly and strategically. In recent years, K-pop fans have massively voiced their opinions concerning social and political causes. They are slowly changing the paradigm as they make their presence known within the political realm. Fans have often taken it upon themselves to stand up and fight for social issues that they deem important. Previous scholarship has

²⁶ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*.

²⁷ Jenkins, *Textual poachers*.

extensively covered how particularly BTS fans participated in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2020. One notable example is the hashtag ‘MatchAMillion’ that quickly spread among the fandom urging fans to ‘match’ the charitable one million dollar donation that BTS members made alongside expressing their support for the movement.²⁸ Fans were able to ‘match’ the one million dollars within a day. Interestingly, BTS had made no request for fans to donate, yet the fandom, referred to as ARMY, quickly mobilised and took their favourite idols’ example and showed support for the movement.²⁹ Another example of K-pop fans utilising K-pop as a tool for activism is the Filipino organisation K-pop Stans For Leni (KS4GG). The grassroots organisation vigorously campaigned for candidate Leni Robredo in the Filipino 2022 election as fears grew over ex-dictator son Marcos Jr.’s possible presidency.³⁰ The organisation was able to mobilise many K-pop fans from all over the country with the uniting factor being K-pop. The organisation’s slogan “Into the New Philippines”, cleverly references popular K-pop group Girls Generation’s song “Into the New World”, which is globally recognised by K-pop fans as a protest song. The organisation and the fans participating established an activist stance and positioned the fans as politically engaged aiming to drive meaningful change.³¹ In both instances, fans localised K-pop and used it as a tool to raise attention to social and political issues.

Moving on, scholarship regarding the intersection of fan activism offers insightful perspectives on the dynamic relationship between fandom and activism. First, the analysis by Brough and Shresthova offers a nuanced examination of how fans engage with political and social issues. They conclude with four key elements to analyse fan activism. The intersection

²⁸ Dal Yong Jin, “Transnational Cultural Power of BTS,” in *The Soft Power of Korean Wave: Parasite, BTS and Drama*, ed. Youna Kim (New York: Routledge, 2022), 149.

²⁹ ARMY, short for Adorable Representatives M.C. for Youth, is the official name of fans supporting BTS.

³⁰ Howard Johnson and Jonathan Head, “Leni Robredo: The woman leading the Philippines’ ‘pink revolution’,” *BBC*, May 7, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-61318519>.

³¹ K-pop Stans 4 Leni, “*K-pop Stans 4 Leni: The Podcast*,” Podcast, *Spotify*. <https://open.spotify.com/show/4vAmddeYhUGCBeoZNx03r3>.

of cultural and political participation can describe how political participation can occur through non-institutional or informal networks using popular culture as its medium. Hence, this could be considered political as fans aim to influence or change the status quo.³² Regardless, the authors also argue that politicising all interaction with popular entertainment and politics can have a depoliticising effect and undermine fans' credibility and goals.³³ This is noteworthy for this research as this thesis argues that K-pop and its idols are mostly not politically inclined, nor is every fan. Therefore, generalising that K-pop fans are politically or socially active can delegitimise their actions and stigmatise the causes they advocate for. Additionally, Jenkins argues that participatory behaviour has increasingly been adopted by mainstream culture, however, that should not imply that all participatory behaviour can be described as resistant behaviour.³⁴ This thesis argues in favour of this argument. As previously discussed, K-pop fans often engage in participatory culture for the goal of simply supporting and boosting their idol's popularity and through this, K-pop fandoms cannot be simply defined as resistant and trying to change the status quo.

This is further attested by Brough and Shresthova as their second point for analysis includes the relationship between participation and resistance in the context of fan activism. This is crucial to make a distinction between when commercial consumption becomes civic or political participation. Commercial participation becomes civic or political reliant on how actors, fans in this case, use and circulate their voices through cultural content -and who consumes it-.³⁵ In contemporary culture, politics are no longer played out solely through institutional affiliations; therefore, participatory entertainment cultures are spaces that may support or encourage grassroots activism and civic participation.³⁶ Moreover, participatory

³² Brough and Shresthova, "Fandom Meets," 6, 9.

³³ Brough and Shresthova, "Fandom Meets," 6, 9.

³⁴ Jenkins, Ito, Boyd, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*, 21.

³⁵ Brough and Shresthova, "Fandom Meets," 11, 12.

³⁶ Brough and Shresthova, "Fandom Meets," 12, 13.

politics can be defined as “interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern.” Furthermore, various forms of participatory politics such as sharing information through social media, engaging in discussions online, creating original content in various media forms to comment on current issues, using online spaces to rally a community towards collective actions, and building databases to investigate ongoing concerns, are effective ways for fans to engage in political activism.³⁷ Consequently, Jenkins argues that participatory politics refers to the ways that mechanisms of cultural participation get harnessed for political purposes.³⁸ This is in line with how K-pop fandoms operate when participating in civic or political activism; fandoms use their fandom mechanisms to participate in activism and they use their voices with a specific civic or political goal. Furthermore, affect, collective identity, and authenticity play a role in fandom activism. Brough and Shresthova argue that fan activism is fuelled by affect, the need for fans to speak out against a cause that is dear to them and to their shared identity within a fandom.³⁹ Finally, Brough and Shresthova argue that the impact of fan activism needs evaluation, taking into account the long-term impacts and examining the goals of fan activism.⁴⁰ Through analysing fan activism that deploys similar characteristics common to their fan culture, K-pop fans’ activism can be analysed in the context of (political) participatory culture.⁴¹ In the context of this research, evaluating fan activism is relevant to understanding how these fandoms are politicised and how they contribute to social change.

³⁷ Jenkins, Ito, Boyd, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*, 156.

³⁸ Jenkins, Ito, Boyd, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*, 156.

³⁹ Brough and Shresthova, “Fandom Meets,” 13, 14.

⁴⁰ Brough and Shresthova, “Fandom Meets,” 15-17.

⁴¹ Brough and Shresthova, “Fandom Meets,” 13, 14.

2.3. Apolitical Idol to Political Fan

These political and socially conscious stances K-pop fans make are remarkable as K-pop music and idols remain mostly apolitical or neutral. This also makes K-pop fans unique as they (have to) initiate activism and it very rarely stems from their favourite artists while in other mainstream cultures, this is usually different. As Western artists are more prone to be politically involved and outspoken, non-K-pop fans take examples from their favourite artists and take action.⁴² As explored previously, K-pop has become a universally enjoyed form of content and has always attempted to stay universal and appeal to the masses. K-pop idols usually refrain from voicing opinions that relate to the current political or social climate, unless fans urge them to which will be discussed after. During the 2022 South Korean presidential elections K-pop idols (and other K-celebrities) awkwardly avoided hand signs and colours to avoid showing any political stance or preference. Idols refrained from using the peace sign, which is used aplenty by K-pop idols, to not accidentally endorse or show a political preference for the controversial second candidate, now president, Yoon Suk-Yeol. Idols also refrained from wearing blue or red clothing, using emojis and backgrounds in those colours to avoid controversy as these colours symbolise the blue Democratic Party (DP), and the red opposition People Power Party (PPP).⁴³ Although idols did urge fans to use their voting rights, showing any political preference is highly frowned upon by Korean fans and non-fans alike.

This apolitical stance has been attested to what K-pop idols are supposed to represent; they are expected to be non-political and have a pure virtue detached from any worldly issues.⁴⁴ Yet, this apolitical stance and idol's neutrality is a political choice to appeal to the masses.

⁴² Jung Sun, "Fan activism, cybervigilantism, and Othering mechanisms in K-pop fandom," In "Transformative Works and Fan Activism," ed. Henry Jenkins and Sangita Shresthova, *Transformative Works and Culture*, no. 10 (2012).

⁴³ Haley Yang, "Idols think twice about their every move during election season," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, March 15, 2022. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2022/03/15/entertainment/kpop/korea-presidential-election-kpop-vote-kpop-politics/20220315155650208.html>

⁴⁴ Yang, "Idols think."

Nowadays, however, K-pop idols have been more vocal about social issues but often only after they faced backlash from fans for not speaking up or stepping up as exemplary role models. When this is the case, why do K-pop fans then play such a prominent role in today's activism for both social and political issues? One of the reasons for this can be linked to the messages that many K-pop idols try to spread in their music and expressions towards fans. Prominently, K-pop groups urge fans to not send gifts and instead donate money to charity or volunteer in the artists' name. As such, many K-pop fans are involved in fundraising and volunteering, focusing on societal issues and social justice.⁴⁵ Thus, many fans involved in K-pop communities are exposed to socially conscious fans within their communities which can inspire them.

Additionally, although K-pop idols usually remain apolitical, they do often promote messages referring to social justices many young people deal with. Many BTS fans became fans because of the 'love yourself' message that they put forward in their 'Love Yourself' album series in 2018 as this resonates with many. The message pushes people to be authentically themselves in every aspect of their lives, including topics that relate to politics.⁴⁶ Additionally, girl groups such as (G)I-dle and Mamamoo have been praised for their empowering messages. (G)I-dle has been praised for standing up against stereotypes against women in their songs explicitly taking a stance against sexism and supporting LGBTQ+ rights.⁴⁷ Mamamoo also carries empowering messages in their songs and they tackle important topics ranging from mental health, societal pressures, and allowing yourself to be who you are.⁴⁸ Lastly, the boy

⁴⁵ Julia Hollingsworth, "K-pop fans are being credited with helping disrupt Trump's rally. Here's why that shouldn't be a surprise," *CNN*, June 22, 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/22/asia/k-pop-fandom-activism-intl-hnk/index.html>.

⁴⁶ Joe Coscarelli, "Why Obsessive K-Pop Fans Are Turning Toward Political Activism," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/22/arts/music/k-pop-fans-trump-politics.html>.

⁴⁷ Oliver Chan, "Show Review: (G)I-DLE is all about empowerment and confidence at their Singapore gig," *Hallyu*, November 20, 2023. <https://www.hallyusg.net/2023/11/20/show-review-gi-dle-are-all-about-empowerment-and-confidence/>.

⁴⁸ LexM, "Why Does Mamamoo Deserve More Love," *Medium*, July 1, 2023. <https://medium.com/@lexidazed/why-does-mamamoo-deserve-more-love-3f84a66c90c2>.

group Stray Kids also has spoken out many times that their songs are to make people feel less alone in their struggles, covering topics regarding mental health.⁴⁹

As these young people look up to these idols who express themselves and try to empower them through their songs and messaging, it can inspire people to do the same. This can translate into standing up for causes that are important to these young people in a way that speaks to them. Specifically, as political and social topics take up a prominent space on social media and the demographic of K-pop fans is known to pay particular attention to politics online, it is not hard to imagine that these young fans feel inclined to take a stance on social media too. Furthermore, they already have a community of like-minded people who can join them and their cause. Next to this, fans also see what their fandom can achieve in terms of K-pop-related actions and through this, young people also recognise that they can use this power for political goals and fight for social causes that mean a lot to them.⁵⁰ All the skills that have been previously mentioned to actively participate within a fandom can be translated into other actions such as activism.

Another relevant consideration that needs to be taken into account is that most K-pop fans seem to be left-wing and socially conscious. This thesis in no way aims to generalise and argue that all K-pop fans participate in activist movements, are politically left-winged, want to involve themselves with the political realm of K-pop, and care for these issues, however, there seems to be an overarching similar ideology between most fans. K-pop in itself is a culture that goes against mainstream conservative culture, fans have willingly learned about this new culture in a language (most) do not understand and are perceived as the underdog when it comes to mainstream popular culture (that is for international fans). Furthermore, as Jenkins attests “fans have chosen these media products from the total range of available texts precisely because

⁴⁹Lai Frances, “STRAY KIDS ARE EMPOWERING A NEW GENERATION OF K-POP,” *TMRW*, 2019. <https://www.tmrwmagazine.com/features/music/stray-kids-k-pop>.

⁵⁰ Coscarelli, “Why Obsessive.”

they seem to hold special potential as vehicles for expressing the fans' pre-existing social commitments and cultural interests; there is already some degree of compatibility between the ideological construction of the text and the ideological commitments of the fans and therefore, some degree of affinity will exist between the meanings fans produce and those which might be located through a critical analysis of the original story.”⁵¹ Therefore, K-pop and its fans already form a stream against the mainstream and this could reflect in many fans being left-winged and finding their community among other fans. As these fan activism topics concern left-wing political direction, this needed to be briefly addressed.

All the aforementioned concepts and aspects allow for this research to examine how K-pop fans in Chile and Thailand use their fandoms and voices within the realm of K-pop to fight for political causes as they have done. Moreover, it allows this research to examine how K-pop fandoms have become politicised without generalising all of K-pop and K-pop fandoms. Hence, all previous scholarship examined in this chapter has aimed to provide an extensive medium to analyse K-pop fans and fandoms in Chile and Thailand.

Chapter 3: K-pop Fans in Chile and Thailand

This chapter investigates K-pop fans' activism in Chile and Thailand. This thesis aims to answer the following research questions: How did Chilean and Thai K-pop fans engage in political activism? What factors contribute to the politicisation of these K-pop fan communities? How did their actions influence public discourse and social change? Through the analysis of fans' activities and content shared online, aided by news articles reporting on fans' actions, this chapter aims to offer a thorough understanding of these K-pop fans' actions and their impact on the social and political landscapes for which they mobilised. The data

⁵¹ Henry Jenkins, ““Get a Life!”: Fans, Poachers, and Nomads,” In *Textual Poachers*, (2nd edition, Taylor and Francis, 2012), 34.

collected for the Chilean fan activities focuses on social media activity including relevant hashtags such as “#ChileViolatesHumanRights”, “#K-popersxboric”, and “#ArmyxBoric” alongside regular K-pop-related hashtags. The aforementioned hashtags went viral and were specifically created to promote these political causes. Furthermore, special attention was paid to the account with the handle K-popersxBoric (now K-popersxApruebo) on various social media platforms, as fans initiated the campaign for Boric through this account. The data concerning Thai fan activism included hashtags such as “#WhatsHappeningInThailand” and “#หยุดคุกคามประชาชน” (stop oppressing people) alongside conventional K-pop hashtags. Similarly, these hashtags were specifically created to endorse those political causes.

K-pop fan activism in Chile and Thailand exemplifies a trend of activism with an extensive background. However, this research will focus on particular events that happened within the time frame of roughly the end of 2019 to 2022. First, this chapter will briefly provide some background to fan’s actions in the respective countries, followed by an extensive analysis of their fan activism, fandom politicisation and impacts.

3.1. Political Participation of K-pop fans in Chile and Thailand

3.1.1. K-pop Fans and the 2019 Protests in Chile

This part takes into account two instances in Chile where K-pop fans actively took part in causes they deemed important, leveraging fandom mechanics and mobilisation to aid their cause. In both instances, fans localised K-pop as a means to contribute to the political agendas they advocated for. First, during the 2019 anti-government protests, K-pop fans, just like many other Chileans took to the streets and social media to protest. Following these protests, K-pop fan communities online have been scrutinised by the government and blamed for the protests. The second instance entails K-pop fans initiating a political campaign to endorse presidential candidate Gabriel Boric, after his first-round win in preparation for the second round of voting.

Starting with the anti-government protests at the end of 2019, initiated by high school students on October 1st, K-pop fans also got involved and used their platforms to speak up against injustices. The students had organised a campaign of toll-dodging in Santiago as a response to the announced fare hike for the public transport system. Their protest set off a widespread reaction from the public, and state agents who responded with drastic violence. In turn, widespread anti-government protests and destruction of public infrastructure were set off as a response to the inequality Chileans faced under President Sebastián Piñera. The protests also highlighted the ramifications caused by the radical reforms imposed by former dictator Gen Augusto Pinochet, furthering social inequality.⁵² The mass protests were harshly suppressed by the government, and Chilean police and military were accused of committing serious human rights violations by UN investigators.⁵³ The protests eventually led to a referendum where Chileans massively voted in favour of rewriting the constitution, opting for a more pro-democratic constitution. In response to the protests, violence, and victimisation by the government, K-pop fans used online spaces for political participation.⁵⁴

In a collective effort, K-pop fans used their digital knowledge to spread awareness about the protests, using fan content to both boost and sabotage hashtags and trending content. By linking the hashtag “#ChileViolatesHumanRights”, for example, with K-pop hashtags, fans were able to boost information about what was happening in Chile and garner international attention.⁵⁵ Figure one shows a Tweet translating to: “Army, remember when Bangtan (BTS)

⁵² Camilo Diaz Pino, ““K-pop is Rupturing Chilean Society”: Fighting With Globalized Objects in Localized Conflicts,” *Communication, Culture and Critique*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2021): 555.

⁵³ Guardian Staff Reporter, “Chile: UN Calls for Prosecution of Police and Army Over Response to Protests,” *The Guardian*, December 13, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/13/chile-un-prosecution-police-army-protests>.

⁵⁴ Melissa Lemieux, “Chilean Government Blames K-Pop for Recent Protests,” *Newsweek*, December 25, 2019, <https://www.newsweek.com/chilean-government-blames-k-pop-recent-protests-1479151>.

⁵⁵ Rivero, “K-pop: From” ; “Poblaciones, Memes Y K-Pop: El Esfuerzo De La Ciudadanía Independiente Por Levantar Una Campaña Paralela Por Boric Y Derrotar a Kast,” *Interferencia*, November 28, 2021, <https://interferencia.cl/articulos/poblaciones-memes-y-k-pop-el-esfuerzo-de-la-ciudadania-independiente-por-levantar-una>.

gave a speech at the UN for UNICEF? In Chile, human rights are being violated, people are killed, tortured, disappeared, and raped. #ARMY always support each other, please share.” The second tweet informs fans about the curfews that are mandated starting October 23, 2019. This type of information was shared among fans, both national and international, to garner attention, raise awareness, and share important information.

<Figure 1. > Examples of tweets made by fans.⁵⁶



Furthermore, fans used a mechanism known as ‘clean up hashtags’ to counter, mock, and minimise content in favour of President Piñera and other conservatives who condemned and discredited the mobilisations against the government. Clean-up hashtags are utilised by fans to, normally, drown out negativity towards a particular idol or group by spamming the hashtag with fancams of their favourite idol or group, which in turn ensures that the negativity gets

⁵⁶ @BTSXRADIOSCHILE, “ATENCIÓN. Ciudades de Chile con "TOQUE DE QUEDA" 23 de Oct. Arica (22:00| 05:00). Calama (21:00|05:00). Antofagasta (21:00| 05:00). Tocopilla (21:00| 05:00),” X, October 23, 2019. <https://x.com/btsxradioschile/status/1187105557855047681?s=48> ;
@Valentia10021, “Armys recuerdan que Bangtan estuvo en la ONU dando un discurso por la UNICEF? En Chile se estan violando los derechos humanos, estan matando,” X, October 23, 2019. <https://x.com/valentia10021/status/1187049200644698113?s=48>.

overtaken by irrelevant content for the particular hashtag.⁵⁷ Both these actions were done on a massive scale and in a strategic effort to successfully bring awareness to the situation, voice their dissatisfaction, and drown out content that did not align with the message they wanted to spread.⁵⁸

While these efforts may not seem like impactful political participation, fans' mass-scale social media presence and coordinated actions provoked harsh and condemning reactions from the Chilean government. On December 19, 2019, the Chilean Ministry of the Interior and Public Security released a 112-page report (also coined BigData report) commenting on Chilean society's "estallido social" (social rupturing).⁵⁹ In the report, technological monitoring was used to analyse the behaviour of close to five million social media users since October 18, 2019, elaborating on foreign intervention causing and promoting the crisis that had occurred during the protests.⁶⁰ This report was an attempt to rid themselves of any responsibility and international condemnation, 'blaming' foreign (leftists and communist) actors for initiating mobilisations and spreading misinformation regarding the protests. Several actors were named to have caused this disruption, however, K-pop fans were particularly highlighted in the report and blamed for causing riots. The report explicitly states "is K-pop behind the Chilean protest?" and accuses fans of making malicious comments about the Chilean police force. Additionally, the report states that users focussed on "questioning deaths during the protests, frequently mentioned human rights violations and criticising the silence of the media or blocking of social networks".⁶¹

The report sparked (inter)national outrage and the government was criticised for not taking responsibility and for creating such a ridiculous claim. K-pop fans promptly responded

⁵⁷ Fancams are videos taken by fans of their favourite idol or group. These videos are highly popular among fans and usually show the idol(s) performing part of a song.

⁵⁸ Rivero, "K-pop: From".

⁵⁹ Pino, "K-pop is rupturing", 552.

⁶⁰ "Poblaciones, Memes Y K-Pop."

⁶¹ Lemieux, "Chilean Government Blames."

to the allegations using memes and further ridiculed the government for using K-pop fans, among others, as scapegoats for the violence and human rights violations. Fans trended the hashtag “#BigData” with “#kpop” to show disdain and criticise the government. Figure two shows a picture of BTS’s member Jin’s mascot with the text: “ I love BTS; Chinese Terror Squad”, making fun of the government calling K-pop fans terrorists who sparked the riots and who listen to foreign “Chinese” music.

< Figure 2. > Example of tweets made by fans criticising the big data report.⁶²



⁶² @Blorcas, “#KPOP #BigData #LenunciaPiñela,” X, December 23, 2019. <https://x.com/blorcas/status/1208904447642030080?s=12>.

<Figure 3. > Example of tweets made by fans criticising the big data report.⁶³



Figure three shows a tweet from the official Chile BTS fan account and calls upon fans: “Despite the funny nature of this great #BigData # KPop analysis, we still want to tell you not to underestimate the ‘power’ of your voices and platforms, and we think it is cool that you use this media and your fandom(s) to fight for a better country”. Referencing BTS’s message of ‘Love Yourself’, which is often associated with being yourself and speaking up for what you believe in.

Furthermore, fans used this opportunity to spread information about the ‘biggest K-pop protest’ in Chile, gathering fans to protest against the injustices of the government. Through the protests, in K-pop fashion with choreographies and K-pop music, fans demanded that the Mayor

⁶³ @BTS_Chile, “A pesar de lo chistoso de este gran análisis #BigData #KPop, de todas formas queremos decirles que no menosprecien el 'poder' de sus voces y,” X, December 22, 2019. https://x.com/bts_chile/status/1208832006026661891?s=48.

should resign for his responsibility in allowing police brutality. Fans united against the injustices from the government and stood up for the social inequality with other protesters.⁶⁴

< Figure 4. > Information calling upon K-pop fans to protest in response to the Big Data report to further demonstrate against the government.⁶⁵



Through deploying tactics fans use to promote and support their favourite artists, fans were able to quickly and effortlessly translate these actions towards other goals. Through this, their actions and initiatives are bridging the gap between traditional politics and political actions, and new impactful forms of political and civic participation using cultural practices, in their case through K-pop, on social media. Furthermore, through the politicisation of K-pop fans by the Chilean government the impact fandom practices have within the social and political landscapes

⁶⁴ Margorie, TRIBUNA ABIERTA. K-POP en el estallido social de Chile,” Red Internacional, December 27, 2019. <https://www.laizquierdadiario.cl/K-POP-en-el-estallido-social-de-Chile>.

⁶⁵ Translation: Both posters call for fans to join demonstrations at plaza Dignidad on December 27, 2019. K-popers for dignity sounds the title of the protest.

@Rsumen, “K-POP Por la Dignidad, este viernes 27 Diciembre en Concepcion. #ChileDesperto #ChileProtests #ChileViolatesHumansRights,” X, December 24, 2019. <https://x.com/rsumen/status/1209573920178876416> ; Fech_Oficial, “Estimades compañeres: les hago la invitación a unirse al KPOPAZO POR LA DIGNIDAD, que estamos organizando con la COORDINADORA FEMINISTAS,” Instagram photo, December 23, 2019. https://www.instagram.com/fech_oficial/p/B6bavX0J56Y/.

are portrayed and shows that political participation online through fandom is highly relevant for social change and is seen as an impactful threat.

3.1.2. Presidential Campaign by Chilean K-pop fans

In 2021, Chilean K-pop fans campaigned for presidential candidate Gabriel Boric, who has since won the presidential elections. Similarly to the Filipino organisation KS4GG, Chilean fans mobilised people on and offline to campaign for Boric. The highly polarised election following the violent protests from 2019 onwards portrayed a stark division within Chile. Boric's opposition, far-right candidate José Kast who opposes immigration, abortion, and LGBTQ+ rights, and showed support for former dictator Pinochet, strikingly contrasted Boric's political promises. Boric was also a prominent actor during the 2019 protests and his campaign is in line with the demands made during those protests.⁶⁶ Accordingly, it is unsurprising to see K-pop fans supporting and actively campaigning for Boric, considering the subjects Boric focuses on, such as LGBTQ+ rights, environmental sustainability, and improving social welfare, are also highly prominent within the K-pop fan communities. Furthermore, after the 2019 protests, fans understood what power they held within the political realm and how their efforts could affect public discourses and decided to use their communities once more.⁶⁷ Boric did not only appeal to (young) K-pop fans for his political views but also his love for K-pop. Through his genuine interactions with K-pop and K-pop fans, posing with photocards of Korean idols and sharing his love for BTS, he was also able to reach a young audience.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Oliver Stuenkel, "More Polarized Than Ever, Presidential Election in Chile Marks New Political Era," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 22, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2021/11/more-polarized-than-ever-presidential-election-in-chile-marks-new-political-era?lang=en>.

⁶⁷ Kpopers por boric, "Q&A English," <https://linktr.ee/Kpopersporboric>.

⁶⁸ Photocards are often obtained in K-pop albums and fans take great pride in collecting and trading them to show support for their favourite idol. <https://remezcla.com/music/gabriel-boric-k-pop-fans-help-chile-new-president-elected/>

The campaign that sparked mass support from K-pop fans for Boric came from six individuals, all K-pop fans, who decided to use their fandom power for their benefit. They created the account handle Kpopers Por Boric (K-pop fans for Boric) on multiple social media platforms after the first round of elections with the goal to mobilise as many fans as possible and spark political participation among fans. In their Q&A they explain that K-pop fans are often addressed in a derogatory manner and they now want to claim this K-pop identity as a political identity.⁶⁹ These fans took inspiration from fans in the U.S. and Colombia who portrayed strategic organisational and mobilisation skills for causes they deemed important and decided to utilise their fandom experience for online activism to motivate citizens (both K-pop fans and non-K-pop fans alike) to vote, popularise Boric and spread awareness about his political proposals, counteract hate speech and fake news, and create an environment for like-minded individuals to share an online political space.⁷⁰

Their efforts were intentional and impactful. They show awareness of other fan initiatives around the globe and what impacts they had, therefore, aiming to utilise this power for their beliefs and political goals. They particularly weaponised online spaces, encouraging fans to create or share content to spread awareness and highlighting that any contribution is meaningful for their cause. In a similar vein, as fans did during the 2019 protests, fans shared and created memes, K-pop content, and edits on social media such as X, TikTok, and Instagram in combination with specific hashtags to promote the candidate and the fans' cause. Fans also created content for Boric in a K-pop-like fashion, in a similar vein to so-called 'fan-edits'. These videos were paired with K-pop idols and music and promoted Boric's candidacy. Here as well, fans helped promote the candidate to K-pop fans by using K-pop hashtags such as #bts, #BTSarmy and BTS's songs. When using such hashtags on platforms as TikTok, content can

⁶⁹ Kpopers por boric, "Q&A English."

⁷⁰ Kpopers por boric, "Q&A English."

gain popularity quickly as they are able to circulate within other's algorithms through the hashtags and sounds used on a video. These hashtags are also used by non-BTS fans to infiltrate the biggest online fandom of BTS. A user with the handle Fancamsxboric, for example, posted videos of Boric featuring popular K-pop songs with fitting song lyrics to show support for the candidate. The videos reached over hundreds of views, with the most popular one having reached over ten thousand views.⁷¹

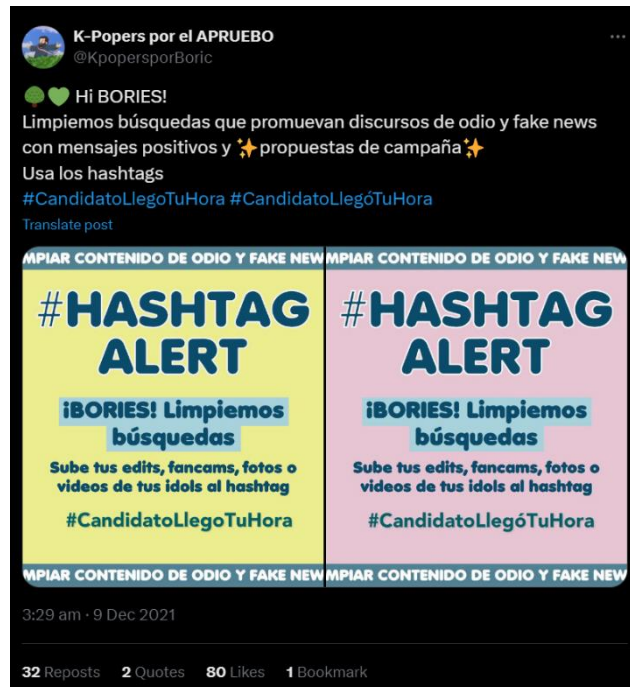
Notably, they again used K-pop content and their acquainted digital savviness to help stop the spread of fake news and negativity in an attempt to garner more positive attraction for Boric's campaign.⁷² Figure 5 shows a tweet saying: "Let's clean searches that promote hate speech and spread fake news with positive messages and campaign proposals, use the hashtags #CandidatoLlegóTuHora #CandidatoLlegóTuHora."⁷³ The attached pictures encourage fans to post edits, fancams, photos and videos of their favourite idols with those hashtags to drown out fake news. As mentioned previously, this tactic employed by fans ensures that information under this hashtag is drowned out by K-pop content, allowing the algorithm to promote this hashtag and its content as entertainment and making it harder for negativity and fake news to reach people on social media. This all the while fans promote and endorse Boric's campaign, allowing them to also garner attention from users who typically would not engage with K-pop hashtags but do use the other hashtags.

⁷¹ @Fancamsxboric. <https://www.tiktok.com/@fancamsxboric>.

⁷² Hyun-su Yim, "KpopersXBoric: K-pop fans who rallied support for Chile's millennial president-elect," *The Korea Herald*, December 24, 2021. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20211224000543>.

⁷³ @Kpopersporboric, "Hi BORIES! Limpiemos búsquedas que promuevan discursos de odio y fake news con mensajes positivos y propuestas de campana. Usa los hashtags #CandidatoLlegóTuHora #CandidatoLlegóTuHora," X, December 9, 2021. <https://x.com/kpopersporboric/status/1468769662079021057?s=12>.

< Figure 5. > Example of tweets to encourage fans to ‘clean up’ hashtags and spam them with K-pop content.



Furthermore, they treated Boric in a K-pop-like fashion and generated a ‘fandom’ surrounding his candidacy. As within K-pop fans, fandoms supporting a particular artist or group receive a fandom name to identify themselves with. Subsequently, supporters of Boric and his candidacy were coined “BORIES” to now create a new identity and sense of belonging within this community. Furthermore, as in K-pop fashion, the fans created lightsticks for him to show support and a ‘cheering kit’, the content for which was shared online for fans to use.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Lightsticks are created specifically for groups and idols for fans to bring during concert or fan activities. Cheering kits are usually generated for concerts by fans and contain small items such as cards, posters, and fan-made trinkets for fans to use.
Yim, “KpopersXBoric: K-pop”.

< Figure 6. > Different banners to show support for Boric, including a QR code to Boric’s political campaign. They were made and distributed by K-popers Por Boric in their cheering kit.⁷⁵



The fans did not only encourage online participation but also initiated offline meet-ups utilising K-pop fan mechanics in the form of cup sleeve events. These events are usually held in honour of an idol’s birthday, however, in this context, fans used this opportunity to meet with like-minded individuals in a safe environment. Additionally, they offered online resources and tutorials to encourage others to also host offline events in support of the desired goal. K-popers Por Boric organised three events in Santiago and delivered over 200 cup sleeves.⁷⁶

The candidate also utilised the fan's support by posting videos on X and TikTok of him receiving gifts from K-pop fans who support him and thanking them for their support.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Kpopers por boric, “Cheering Kit,” <https://linktr.ee/Kpopersporboric>.

⁷⁶ Kpopers por boric, “Q&A English.”

⁷⁷ Gabriel Boric (@gabrielboric), “Muchas gracias #KpopersxBoric por los regalitos! Mi favorito fue Koya #boric2022 #parati,” TikTok, December 4, 2021. https://www.tiktok.com/@gabrielboric/video/7037971948953013509?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=7384426617118213665 ;

Opposition candidate Kast also created and promoted his own K-pop song, in Spanish, asking voters whether they listen to ‘our’ K-pop and stating that everything will be fine.⁷⁸ This song, however, received harsh criticism for not being K-pop. Additionally, The song was ridiculed for its tactics as the conservative party ruled K-pop and its fans to be ‘rupturing Chilean society’. This furthermore amplifies that the online presence of K-pop fans endorsing Boric also reached non-K-pop fans. In an attempt to relate to these K-pop fans, Kast became a topic of ridicule. Fans did not appreciate the opposition candidate attempting to suddenly appreciate K-pop fans as a means to find voters, contrasting the positivity Boric received as he showed genuine appreciation to K-pop fans for their endorsement as a K-pop fan himself.

< Figure 7. > Tweet by candidate Kast promoting his K-pop song.⁷⁹



Gabriel Boric (@gabrielboric), “Me avisaron que al comando llegó este regalo de @KpopersporBoric ¡gracias! y veo que es tendencia #BTSenChile2022 ¿coincidencia? No lo creo,” X, December 1, 2021. <https://x.com/gabrielboric/status/1466171642732851215?s=48>.

⁷⁸ José Antonio Kast Rist (@joseantoniokast), “¿Escuchaste nuestro K-pop? Tranquilos todo va a estar bien,” X, December 6, 2021. <https://x.com/joseantoniokast/status/1467888354616557568?s=20>.

⁷⁹ Translates to: “Did you listen to our K-pop? Don't worry, everything will be fine”.

The aim of these fans' campaigns was mainly targeted towards younger voters, however, the consensus for their campaign was aimed to reach as many people as they possibly could.⁸⁰ As fans can mobilise quickly and spread information fast, utilising their fandom mechanics had a large reach. Through online mobilisation utilising K-pop fandom tactics, fans were able to create a community that successfully contributed to Boric's campaign.

The aforementioned explored mobilisations of Chilean K-pop fans show how these fans actively used their voices for civic and political causes where K-pop had become a resource for their political expression. Fans used their established participatory culture for a political goal through tactical and meaningful actions. The main aim for the Chilean K-pop fans was to spread awareness and garner attention to specific issues they deemed important, specifically using fandom tactics on social media to clean up and drown out negativity and fake news, and generating mass content to promote the causes they advocated for. Furthermore, they mobilised fans to campaign for presidential candidate Boric. Brough and Shresthova discussed how a collective identity of fans and fandoms affects their activism and these K-pop fans portray a high level of collective identity by generating a newfound collective identity as K-pop fans to support political causes.⁸¹ Additionally, Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik's concept of 'civic imagination' can explain how these K-pop fans employed popular culture to identify political issues through a language that speaks to them, in this case, K-pop mechanisms.⁸² This implies that these K-pop fans used popular culture as a resource for political thought and expression as is clearly visible. Through the mediums K-pop fans use to participate within the fandom realm, they were able to translate, resonate, and relate civic and political thoughts to the culture they consume. Jenkins uses the concept of civic imagination to argue that before one can change the

⁸⁰ Kpopers por boric, "Q&A English."

⁸¹ Brough and Shresthova, "Fandom."

⁸² Ioana Literat and Neta Kligler-Vilenchik, "How Popular Culture Prompts Youth Collective Political Expression and Cross-Cutting Political Talk on Social Media: A Cross-Platform Analysis." *Social Media + Society*, Vol. 7, no. 2 (2021): 3.

world, one needs to be able to imagine what this other, better world looks like. Fans experience this ‘better world’ through the fan communities they are part of and can express their political thought within these communities.⁸³ In the previously explored examples, Chilean K-pop fans have localised K-pop mechanisms and used their relatable popular culture as a resource for their political expression. These fans meaningfully contributed to political causes they deemed important and encouraged political participation among others.

3.1.2. Thai K-pop Fans and the 2020 Pro-Democracy Protests

In Thailand, K-pop fans have a long history of national activism. This thesis, however, focuses on the 2020 pro-democracy protests where Thai K-pop fans played a prominent part. Starting in February 2020, Thais have emerged in a wave of activism and protests that lasted all of 2020 and continued in later years. Protests first emerged after the dissolution of the Future Forward Part, a popular progressive party, and the appointment of Prayuth Chan-ocha, a former military coup leader, as prime minister. The youth-led movement created a wave of protests throughout the country, demanding the removal of Prayuth, an end to activist harassment, the abolition of harsh defamation laws protecting the royal family from criticism, and reforms to the monarchy to restrict their power.⁸⁴ The protests became violent and the government and police were blamed for violating human rights. Thai K-pop fans joined the movement on and offline, taking inspiration from South Korean K-pop fans and their use of K-pop in previous protests. Thai fans used the song “Into the New World” by Girls’ Generation as one of their protest songs, just as their Korean counterparts have done so in the past.⁸⁵

⁸³ Jenkins, Ito, Boyd, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*, 153.

⁸⁴ Jessie Lau, “‘Young People Feel Hopeless’: The Thai Protesters Revolting Against Authoritarian Rule,” *New Statesman*, September 9, 2021, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/2020/11/young-people-feel-hopeless-thai-protesters-revolting-against-authoritarian-rule>.

⁸⁵ Patpicha Tanakasempipat, “K-pop’s social media power spurs Thailand’s youth protests,” Reuters, November 5, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-protests-k-pop-idUSKBN27I23K/>.

Thai activism has a prominent connection to online activism, utilising social media to express grievances and voice opinions due to the complicated history of political and military unrest within the country, and with the government often restricting traditional media outlets.⁸⁶ Therefore, online activism is a crucial medium for Thai protesters to speak out and spread information. As Chilean K-pop fans did as well, Thai K-pop fans also used hashtag campaigns to spread awareness and garner attention to the injustices happening during the protests. K-pop fans used their social media accounts to spread protest-related hashtags such as ‘#whathappeninginThailand’ alongside regular K-pop hashtags to massively increase the range and garner international awareness and support. In an interview with Reuters, fans attest that they, as Thai citizens, feel the need to use their platforms and voices for things that matter.⁸⁷ Again, fans intentionally used their reach collectively to show support for the cause and aim to spark broad support. Subsequently, fans used the hashtag to spread information regarding the protests, including videos of the violence occurring during the demonstrations and asking other fans to share content about what was happening in Thailand intending to receive support from international audiences too. Furthermore, fans also used K-pop hashtags to undermine pro-monarchy hashtags with memes and K-pop content.⁸⁸ This is similar to the Chilean fans in an effort to drown out negativity and fake news regarding the pro-democracy movements. Drowning out such trends on social media, which could undermine the protesters' cause, allows the information fans deem important to appear more prominently than the opposition content.

Figure eight shows two screen captures of tweets of fans asking for help to share information surrounding the pro-democracy movements. Both tweets include K-pop hashtags along with the movement hashtags and include pictures and videos of the violent protests. The

⁸⁶ Elise Thomas, Tracy Beattie, Albert Zhang, and Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

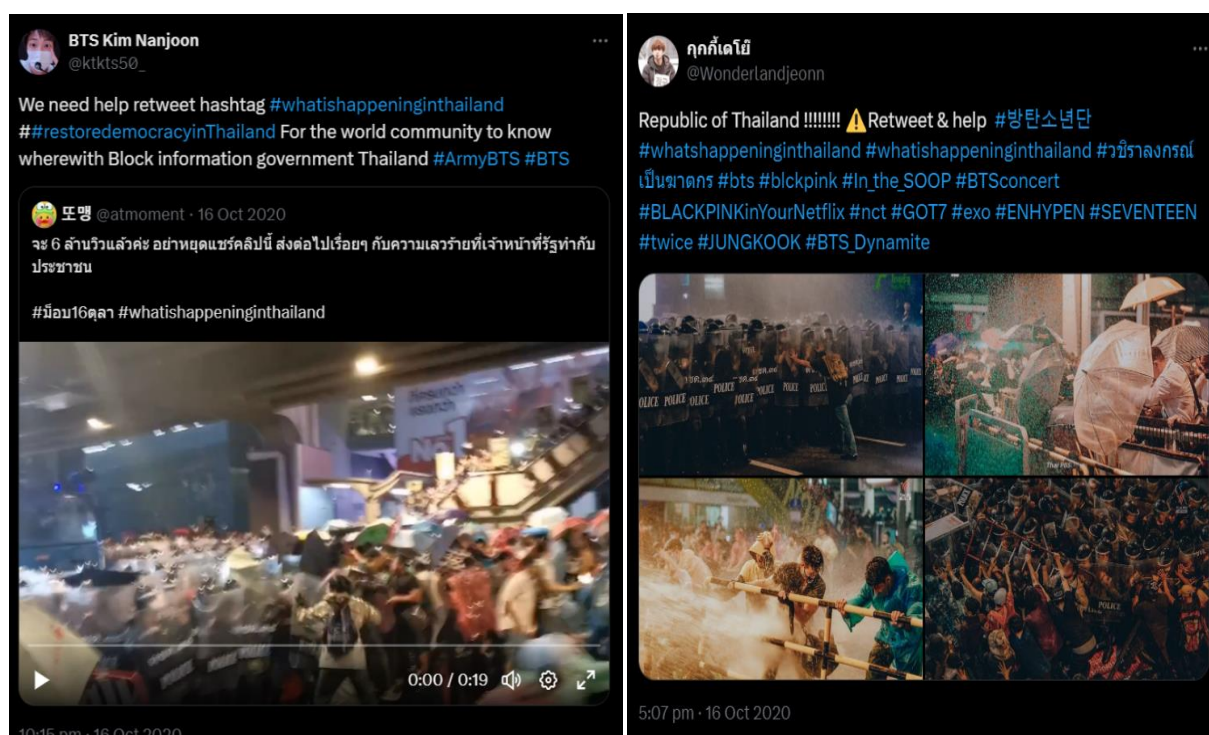
“#WhatsHappeningInThailand : the power dynamics of Thailand's digital activism.” International Cyber Policy Centre (2020): 2.

⁸⁷ Tanakasempipat, “K-pop's social media”.

⁸⁸ Tanakasempipat, “K-pop's social media”.

use of K-pop-related hashtags alongside the protest hashtags allows the tweets to infiltrate K-pop-related trends on social media, which allows anyone who interacts with those K-pop hashtags to be exposed to the Thai protest tags as well. International condemnation not only puts pressure on the government, it also allows actors to support the cause. Fans consciously use their social media platforms to aid in bringing virality to what matters to them.

<Figure 8. > Examples of tweets calling upon (international) fans to spread awareness for the movement.⁸⁹



Many fans also shared informative posters in different languages asking international fans to ‘stand by’ the Thai population. The posters were shared in English, Korean, Chinese, and

⁸⁹ @ktkts50, “We need help retweet hashtag #whatishappeninginthailand ##restoredemocracyninThailand For the world community to know wherewith Block information,” X, October 16, 2020.

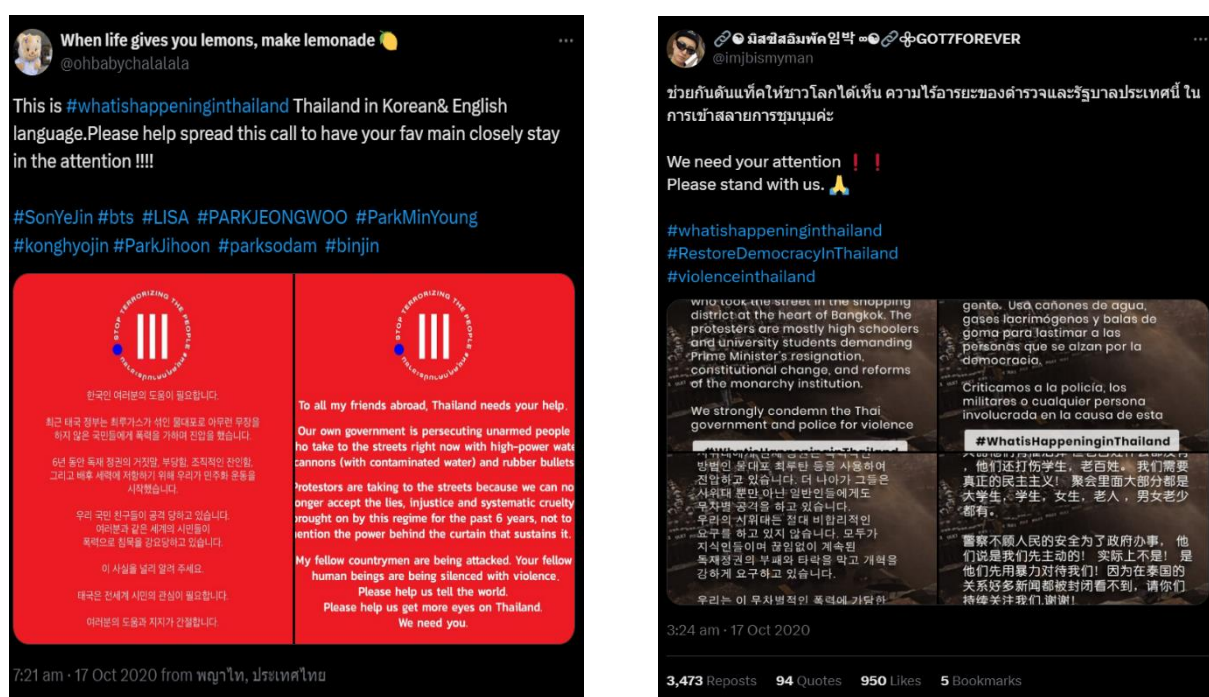
<https://x.com/ktkts50/status/1317197440005492736?s=48> ;

@Wonderlandjeonn, “Republic of Thailand !!!!!!! Retweet & help #방탄소년단 #whatishappeninginthailand #whatishappeninginthailand #วิชิตกรณเป็นฆาตกร #bts #blckpink,” X, October 16, 2020.

<https://x.com/wonderlandjeonn/status/1317119967117012993?s=48>.

Spanish for example and asked for help to push the hashtag to gain international awareness and support as can be seen by the examples presented in figure eight. The posters contain information about the violence against protesters and give information about why Thais are protesting. Furthermore, the posters often contain QR codes for news articles to give more information concerning the situation. Spreading information in this manner effectively distributes knowledge surrounding the topic and encourages people to become aware of what the cause is about.

< Figure 9. > Tweets by fans with posters in different languages asking fans to spread the word on the protests in Thailand.⁹⁰



⁹⁰@imjbismyman, “ช่วยกันดันแก้ให้ชาวโลกได้เห็น ความไร้อารยะของตำรวจและรัฐบาลประเทศนี้ ในการเข้าสลายการชุมนุมค่ะ. We need your attention. Please stand with us,” X, October 17, 2020. <https://x.com/imjbismyman/status/1317275247540727809> ; @ohbabychalalala, “This is #whatishappeninginthailand Thailand in Korean& English language.Please help spread this call to have your fav main closely stay in the attention !!!!” X, October 17, 2020. <https://x.com/ohbabychalalala/status/1317334961045696514?s=48>.

Remarkably, Thai fans also massively organised fundraisers on different social media platforms to support protesters with protective gear and fund pro bono lawyers for arrested protesters. Many protesters who have been arrested are subjected to section 112 of the Thai criminal code, the lèse-majesté provision. Under this law, anyone criticising the royal family is subjected to this law and can face three to fifteen years in prison once convicted. The government weaponised this law to squander opposition and protesters.⁹¹ To help protesters, different K-pop fandoms started fundraisers in the name of their favourite idols. In just nine hours, a fan page of the group Girls' Generations raised over 780,000 baht (equating to over 30 thousand euros) through its followers. Other fan pages joined suit and together fans of K-pop were able to raise over four million baht (over 120 thousand euros) within a week. Part of the donations were directed towards purchasing protective gear for protesters and organising deliveries of the gear. However, most of the donations went towards supporting Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, who provide pro bono legal aid to protesters.⁹² Thus, by using their quick mobilisation tactics, fans were able to provide monetary aid for the cause they cared for and were not only able to help by spreading awareness but also by providing help for protesters offline.

Lastly, in response to what happened during the protests and in a collective effort to protest themselves, K-pop fans massively encouraged each other to divert and cancel their 'happy birthday' adverts for their idols on the BTS Skytrain and MRT stations.⁹³ Instead, fans were encouraged to run them on the back of tuk-tuks in Bangkok, as these drivers were hit hardest due to the decline of tourism following the COVID-19 lockdowns.⁹⁴ A tweet by one

⁹¹ Jessica Rawnsley, "How K-pop Fans Are Helping Thai Protesters Stay Out of Jail," *New Statesman*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/2021/03/how-k-pop-fans-are-helping-thai-protesters-stay-out-jail>.

⁹² Tanakasempipat, "K-pop's social media".

⁹³ Fans often purchase billboard or advertisement spaces to wish their favourite idols happy birthday. Fans globally engage in such activities and post pictures with the billboards online. Fans do this to show support for their favourite idol and promote them offline.

⁹⁴ Paritta Wangkiat, "What K-pop can teach us about politics," *Bangkok Post*, December 7, 2020.

of the biggest BTS fan accounts with almost 400 thousand followers also urged fans to cancel purchasing billboards in the BTS (railroad) and MRT stations as they were causing hardship to protesters and to stop funding organisations such as these.⁹⁵ The tweet received over 26 thousand reposts and over six thousand likes. So fans did. Media reported that in early December, 24 tuk-tuks were running ads. These advertisement spaces in stations cost between 20 to 60 thousand baht (500 to 1500 euros) per month depending on the size and fans expressed that they did not want to spend their money supporting corporations that do not support the pro-democracy movements, instead spending their money to help people in need as the tuk-tuk drivers.⁹⁶

In Thailand, K-pop fans similarly used their fandom mechanisms as Chilean K-pop fans, however, more so used their mobilisation force to create monetary funds to show support in that manner. Fans used their voices to engage in political activism both on and offline. Through their collective intentional and tactical effort fans contributed to support the movement and aided in bringing awareness and monetary support to the movement. As with Chilean K-pop fans, Thai fans utilise fandom mechanisms as a means to relate their political thoughts and intents with the popular culture they consume and translate these resources as a tool to politically engage and contribute to the activist movements happening within Thailand. Additionally, Thai fans show intricate knowledge of the causes they advocate for and intently aim to use K-pop to help the cause. By mobilising fandoms to start fundraisers to support protesters for example, but also through the way fans mobilised their forces to stop funding organisations that did not align with their causes. They found new ways to support their

<https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2031059/what-k-pop-can-teach-us-about-politics>.

⁹⁵ @BTS_Thailand. “ขอเชิญชวนอาร์มีและแฟนคลับศิลปินท่านอื่นๆต่อจากนี้ไปยกเลิกการทำโปรเจคต่างๆด้วยการซื้อป้ายโฆษณาบน BTS และ MRT เพราะเมื่อวานทั้งสององค์กรนี้,” X, October 17, 2020.

https://x.com/BTS_Thailand/status/1317287601888391201.

⁹⁶ “I (DON’T) NEED U: K-POP FANS MOVE ADS FROM SKYTRAINS TO TUK-TUKS,” *Khaosod English*, December 3, 2020. <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/crimecourtscalamity/2020/12/03/i-dont-need-u-k-pop-fans-move-ads-from-skytrains-to-tuk-tuks/>.

favourite idols while supporting their political ideals as fans did with the tuk-tuk adverts. Fans aimed to use fandom tactics to meaningfully contribute to the political causes they deemed important and encouraged political participation within their K-pop communities.

3.2. Fandom Politicisation and Impacts

The previous section elaborated on how Chilean and Thai K-pop fans engaged in political and social activism, however, relevant for this research is also to examine what factors contribute to the politicisation of these K-pop fan communities and the impacts they had on public discourse and social change.

From the previously explored actions from fans, it is clear that fans themselves have taken the initiative to try and help change the status quo through an informal network. They politically participated in causes they deemed important utilising K-pop fandom mechanics. These fans have created a sub-category of fandom with like-minded socially and politically inclined individuals with whom they were able to mobilise as regular K-pop fandoms do. Both fans in Chile and Thailand display how they intersected cultural and political participation as described by Brough and Shresthova.⁹⁷ Through an informal network, they used K-pop and their fandoms as a resource to express their political opinions. Deploying fandom tactics and mechanisms such as hashtag campaigns and endorsing a presidential candidate in a K-pop manner, these fans are aware that these are effective ways to spread information, raise awareness, and encourage political participation within their communities. This is an attempt to challenge mainstream discourses outside the K-pop realm and in an attempt to aid in changing the status quo. Additionally, as Jenkins explores, the mechanisms of their cultural participation get harnessed for political and civic purposes.⁹⁸ These fans' actions have become

⁹⁷ Brough and Shresthova, "Fandom."

⁹⁸ Jenkins, Ito, Boyd, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*.

a force for political participation through the manner fans have voiced their opinions and raised awareness for the causes they value, albeit it being through the use of cultural resources. These fans are aware of their impacts, as displayed in the manner fans call other fans to action. This contributes to encouraging a broader audience and raising awareness of their cause.

Through deploying fandom tactics and using them for political and civic purposes, fans were successful in raising attention and awareness on an international scale that did not go unnoticed. Fans actively created a political label for themselves to also show that their actions were meaningful and purposeful. All these factors lead to the politicisation of K-pop fans and fandoms. As portrayed previously, fans do this consciously in an attempt to use the power they realise they have regarding their favourite idols and translate it into effective social and political action. By politicising their cultural resources, in this case, K-pop, for the specific purpose of advocating for the causes these communities of fans find important, fans actively and purposefully contribute to political movements and K-pop fandoms become politicised.

This thesis therefore also argues that their actions do not have a depoliticising effect. First, it is clear that these fans are politically inclined and feel a need to participate within the political realm. The usage of K-pop mechanisms seems to be a logical choice for these fans as they know how to harness them in an attempt to create positive change and try and contribute to changing the status quo. K-pop fandoms in and of itself are not political. However, the groups that form within these fandoms and who create a dual identity with K-pop and politics certainly are. The fandoms of K-pop become politicised as fans employ K-pop tactics as a political tool and generate a political identity for them.

Nonetheless, this thesis does not argue that K-pop in and of itself is political, although this narrative gets pushed by both fans and media outlets. This thesis argues for a more nuanced view that encapsulates this research. K-pop does have political dimensions, as has been demonstrated previously through governmental influence and soft power motives, however, K-

pop in and of itself, I would argue is not. As explicitly stated previously, K-pop is mostly apolitical. However, through the messaging of K-pop songs, for example, commenting on social justice and idols encouraging fans to be socially involved, I do believe that K-pop inspires fans to speak up and can be used as a tool for political activism. Hence these particular fans do become political. Jin argues that engaging in the activities of K-pop fans as mentioned previously, indicates a high level of social awareness but does not make these fans explicitly political.⁹⁹ However, this thesis argues that they do. They speak out, engage in discussions online, urge others to take action as well as in and outside of their fandoms and politically engage through the medium of K-pop. Additionally, these fans show a high political awareness, attempting to effectively and meaningfully contribute to the larger causes they have become a part of. Thus, describing these fans and their actions as simply socially conscious ignores the impacts of what these fans are trying to accomplish. The communities these fans create have evolved into forces for political activism. Thus, it can be said that these fandom communities have become a driving power for activism and can do so in large numbers. Jin does attest that K-pop activism has advanced as a new form of protest culture where a global fandom can aptly utilise social media and from a ‘transnationally imaged community’, instead of physically protesting.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, K-pop fandoms are a force to be reckoned with when it comes to issues they want to address and find important.

The resistant nature of these fans has also affected public discourse and social change. First, traditional media has recognised fans' significant influence. Instead of being categorised as mere fans, the media refers to both Chilean and Thai fans as powerful forces aiding the political movements they were a part of. Mobilising forces to combat fake news, spread awareness of political causes, and encourage political participation in the way both Chilean and Thai fans did, portrays how fans use their fandom tactics to contribute and amplify the political

⁹⁹ Jin, “Transnational,” 150.

¹⁰⁰ Jin, “Transnational,” 152.

causes they deem important. Through the use of social media, combining political hashtags with K-pop hashtags, fans were able to spread the causes to a wide range of people and garner international attention. K-pop fans cannot solely be credited, however, it is clear they did massively aid the cause, as their specific actions also garnered the attention of traditional media outlets.

Additionally, news outlets credited Boric's victory and the high turnout of voters to the help of K-pop fans.¹⁰¹ This is significant as it amplifies K-pop fans' ability to effectively mobilise for political activism. Additionally, it shows the effectiveness of their mobilisations as meaningful contributions to the political causes they participated in. It is relevant to note that these fans cannot be solely credited to Boric's victory, however, they certainly aided his popularity. K-pop fans also aided in spreading information regarding the election amongst other fans, which may have aided in a higher turnout among younger voters as through this context they can relate to the political context. Notwithstanding, the Chilean government's 'Big Data' report, although in an attempt to deflect blame and responsibility for the violence against protesters, highlights the political impact of K-pop fans. Their online mobilisations and attempts to raise awareness and garner attention do not go unnoticed and are regarded as a political force.

Thai fans on the other hand were admired for donating and supporting the pro-democracy movements. The Thai Lawyers for Human Rights credited the rise in donations to K-pop fans, explaining that this will drastically increase their chances of helping protesters.¹⁰² Furthermore, the birthday messages being diverted from train stations to tuk-tuk drivers also amplifies the impact these fans have. Fans' willingness to show support for their idol and at the same time support a political cause shows what fans are capable of. Hence, this thesis argues that Chilean and Thai fans' actions had a significant influence on the political realm.

¹⁰¹ Soo Youn, "How K-pop Stans Are Shaping Elections Around the Globe," *MIT Technology Review*, February 17, 2023, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2023/02/16/1067943/kpop-fans-shaping-elections-worldwide/>.

¹⁰² Rawnsley, "How K-pop Fans."

Lastly, there are some limitations to note regarding this research. As this research relies on social media content, measuring the direct impact of K-pop fans concerning political change is challenging as the long-term impact of these fans' actions cannot be portrayed and their actions cannot be credited as sole contributors to these political causes. Therefore, it is difficult to attribute specific outcomes to their actions.

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to answer the following research questions: how did Chilean and Thai K-pop fans engage in political and social activism? What factors contribute to the politicisation of these K-pop fan communities? How did their actions influence public discourse and social change?

This thesis concludes that in both Chile and Thailand, K-pop fans have utilised fandom tactics and practices for political activism. This thesis establishes that Chilean K-pop fans have attached and claimed a political identity to themselves to garner attention for the human rights violations during the 2019 anti-government protests. Furthermore, through the usage of fandom mechanics, weaponising online spaces to spread awareness for their political causes instead of their favourite idols, fans were able to mobilise K-pop fans to garner (international) attention, spread awareness, and call upon others to speak out against the injustices. Furthermore, K-pop fans claimed a political identity and were able to establish a fandom surrounding candidate Boric during the second round of the presidential election in 2021. They purposefully and meaningfully contributed to the candidate's endorsement by employing fandom tactics. They mobilised existing fandoms to create a newfound movement for their political agenda. Thai fans also used fandom tactics to help aid the pro-democracy movements in 2020. These fans used their mobilisation skills and online presence to also create fundraisers to actively support

protesters in the field and those who were arrested. Their online mobilisation tactics also aided in garnering international attention from other K-pop fans who then also aided their fundraisers.

Furthermore, the political activism of these fans underscores the intricate intersection of cultural and political participation. They were able to leverage their K-pop communities to engage in political causes. By harnessing their cultural participation for political purposes, fans not only raised awareness and international attention, they also created a distinct political identity within their communities. Their actions were impactful and contributed to the social change they mobilised for. This conscious politicisation of K-pop highlights their role as significant influences within the political landscape. They prove that while K-pop itself may be apolitical, their fandoms have evolved into powerful agents of activism.

Lastly, future research is needed to precisely determine the impact of Chilean fans on the election. Studying the digital media skills of fans and how this affects the effectiveness of their political campaigns could be relevant to exploring what impact fans' endorsement of candidates has on the election, especially now that more K-pop fans take the initiative to use K-pop as a tool for political campaigning. Furthermore, assessing how fan activism translates into voter turnout and political awareness could be relevant to precisely determine the political impact of fans' actions.

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